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ABSTRACT

The bulk of testimony in the writings and recorded histories of the daughters of immigrants and the first generation of Native Americans educated in American schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals that, although the ties between female generations became more tangled with the strains of acculturation, the bonds were stretched but not severed. A sense of loyalty to their mothers and the cultures they represented remained strong. This paper compares the remembered experiences of the first and newest Americans in an attempt to understand the various ways cultural change can affect the mother-daughter relationship. Although both Native and newly-arrived Americans were subject to pressures of assimilation, the beginnings of the process for each group were vastly different, greatly affecting the maternal response to her daughter's acceptance of American ways. The cycle of life moved most Native American women from daughter to mother to grandmother in an unbroken line, surrounded by the family and the community, living in and with the native homeland. This family solidarity began to splinter when Anglo Americans gained control of Indian land and attempted to control Native American lives. (Author/ERB)

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Mothers and Daughters in 20th Century Native American and Immigrant Autobiography

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A paper presented at the American Studies Association Convention, Minneapolis, MN, September 28, 1979.

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Mothers and Daughters in 20th Century Native American and Immigrant Autobiography*

Helen M. Bannan, Women Studies, University of New Mexico

A paper presented at the American Studies Association Convention, September 28, 1979 Minneapolis, Minnesota.

"'What shall I do with my daughter, who is now my mother?'"[1] With these heart-tearing words, a Hopi mother protested the disruption of the age-old order of generational continuity caused by her daughter's education and resulting insistence upon following American ways. Instead of learning the requirements of Hopi womanhood at her mother's side, Polingaysi Qoyawayma and other Native American girls of her generation, the first who had learned different lessons at school, scorned tradition in the name of progress, and pushed their mothers toward acceptance of the new American lifestyle that surrounded their reservation.

Native American mothers were not alone in being forced to accept their daughters' help in adjusting to a multicultural society that the young knew better than the old, a situation that "reversed the natural order of things."[2] Immigrant mothers, similarly beset by the "bewilderment and uncertainty" attendant upon immersion in a foreign culture, also learned that "they needs must trust us children . . . and take the law from their children's

*In this paper, oral histories and "as told to" personal statements are included in "autobiography," due to the richness of these sources and the relative paucity of autobiographies in the formal sense.

mouths."[3] Both Native American and immigrant mothers found this "law" of role reversal bitter to the taste and difficult to swallow. Untold centuries of matrilineal continuity were behind their adherence to traditional patterns. Although they realized that the Anglo-American world outside ethnic ghetto and Indian reservation indeed was powerful, they had hoped it could remain outside, leaving the core of female experience, the family, intact.

The bulk of testimony in the writings and recorded histories of the daughters of immigrants and the first generation of Native Americans educated in American schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals that, although the ties between female generations became more tangled with the strains of acculturation, the bonds were stretched but not severed. A sense of loyalty to their mothers and the cultures they represented remained strong. This paper will compare the remembered experiences of the first and the newest Americans in an attempt to understand the various ways cultural change can affect the mother-daughter relationship.

Although both Native and newly-arrived Americans were subject to pressures of assimilation, the beginnings of the process for each group were vastly different, greatly affecting the maternal response to her daughter's acceptance of American ways. An immigrant mother was forced to concede that she herself had set the chain reaction of change in motion: she had left her own mother to seek a new life in a new land. Many immigrant women were plagued with guilt over breaking these ties. Elizabeth

Hansanovich could never erase from memory the echo of her mother's screams as she left her and Russia in 1912. "Oh, my mother, if I were only able to repay you . . . for all the injustice we did you by running away to look for our own happiness."[4] Lucy Yug left for America with her mother's blessing, intending to return to Slovenia in two years with a husband and a fortune. Instead she found her fiance deeply in debt for her passage and their wedding; she had a daughter of her own when she heard that her mother had died "'late at night, calling for you.'" As her firstborn daughter, Mary Molek, later wrote, "That day a cord broke --- a cord fastened to a stake planted across the ocean and tightly stretched. It snapped back forcefully to one of the stakes, and severed bonds from the other forever."[5]

Immigrant mothers who had thus broken their own ties to homeland and family were vulnerable both to guilt, and to their daughter's assertions of a similar independence. When Maxine Hong Kingston refused to remain in her immigrant Chinese mother's household, she observed, "The gods pay her and my father back. . . . My grandmother wrote letters pleading for them to come home, and they ignored her. Now they know how she felt."[6]

Until the advent of compulsory education for their daughters, few Native American mothers could empathize with Kingston's foremothers from their own experience. The cycle of life moved most Native American women from daughter to mother to grandmother in an unbroken line, surrounded by the family and the community, living

in and with the native homeland. At an early age, girls began to learn the skills that would be required of them as women, and gradually "a daughter should be able to take over the work and let her mother sit down to baskets," as Maria Chona, a traditional Papago woman, said and did.[7] Mothers and grandmothers remained close to their daughters, instructing them through stories and advice. As Lina Zuni, an aged Zuni traditionalist who lived with her daughter and grandchildren, stated, "Every day I tell my children something. Perhaps they listen to me. Perhaps that is why we live together nicely."[8]

This family solidarity began to splinter, however, when Anglo Americans gained control of Indian land and attempted to control Native American lives. Unlike the immigrants, who for various reasons epitomized in the word opportunity, voluntarily left their native lands, Native Americans fought to retain their homelands, and "the West has come to impinge upon or engulf them."[9]

Native American mothers could not blame themselves for beginning the process of change that was breaking up their families; they could only resist it as best they could, and curse their own powerlessness when their efforts failed. They quickly learned to fear the American newcomers, and attempted to protect their daughters from contact with them. Sarah Winnemucca's mother buried her in sand to prevent her capture by goldseekers rushing across the Paiute's Nevada homeland on the way to California; other Paiute women became "afraid to have children, for fear they shall have

daughters, who are not safe even in their mother's presence."[10] Daughters sensed the source of their mothers' anxiety, and many responded as the small Yankton Dakota girl, Zitkala-Sa, did: "'I hate the paleface that makes my mother cry.'"[11]

An American policy that arroused many maternal tears was the boarding school approach to education, by which children, removed from their homes and families, were taught English and some vocational skills, and to despise the "savage" cultures of their parents. Most Native American mothers resisted these official captures of their daughters: "'It is not the Hopi way of caring for children, this tearing them from their homes and their mothers.'"[12] Some mothers pleaded that they needed the help of an only daughter; others hid their children under blankets or in storage bins, but eventually most were "caught," and a few, consumed by curiosity, went voluntarily.[13] Zitkala-Sa's mother was probably typical of many in giving her reluctant permission to her daughter's schooling: "'She will need an education when she is grown, for then there will be fewer real Dakotas, and many more palefaces. . . . But I know my daughter must suffer keenly in this experiment.'"[14]

The sorts of sufferings young Native American schoolgirls experienced closely resemble those endured by immigrant women, which historian Oscar Handlin has characterized as "a succession of shattering shocks." Handlin's description of the essence of pain felt by The Uprooted fits equally well those torn from foreign or Ameican native soil.

> For many . . . it was the first time away from home, away from the safety of the circumscribed little villages in which they had passed all their years. Now they would learn to have dealings with people essentially different from themselves. Now they would collide with unaccustomed problems, learn to understand alien ways and alien languages, manage to survive in a grossly foreign environment.15

On their way to their destinations, both immigrants and Native American schoolgirls coped with new technological means of transportation, their first tastes of urban life, and the growing realization that they had left home and its security in pursuit of something unknown, and potentially dangerous.

The bureaucratic welcome experienced by most members of both groups was frightening, whether it occurred at Ellis Island or an Indian school. The process of entrance might entail being stripped of one's clothes for a medical examination, receiving a new name, and for Native Americans, new clothes, and a most untraditional new haircut. Fear permeated the atmosphere: at Ellis Island, the primary terror was that one might be sent back. As "Katya Govsky," a Russian Jewish immigrant, recalled, "Ellis Island . . . was a nightmare. . . . They ask you all kinds of questions. It's an awful place; it's so morbid, it's like a dungeon. This one cries and this one faints and this one pulls their hair."[16]

Most immigrants were released to start their new lives after hours or days of detention; many Native American students were going through what were the first days what they knew would be years away from home, in the same institutional setting. While some girls, like Hopi Helen Sekaquaptewa, enjoyed the novelty of the first few days,

"after a while, . . . we got real homesick. Evenings we would gather in a corner and cry softly so the matron would not hear and scold or spank us. . . . I can still hear the plaintive little voices saying, 'I want to go home. I want my mother.'"[17] Zitkala-Sa vividly recollected the feelings that prompted her tears: "Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. . . . In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder."[18]

Time dried the tears of most young Native American scholars, who, after years of immersion in the school environment, often unrelieved by summer vacations at home, accomodated themselves to the boarding school routine. The girls accepted the harsh disciplinary methods, hard work in school shops and kitchens, and difficult schoolwork, and some began to aspire to success in terms their teachers would approve. As Helen Sekaquaptewa stated, "I had lived at the school so long it seemed like my home."[19]

Similarly, immigrant women learned to adjust to their new environments, and to swallow their disappointment that the supposedly golden streets were often unpaved and lined with tenements. While still retaining responsibility for household and children, many immigrant women worked to help support their families: some beside their husband in small businesses or on farms, others in factories. Many, like Josephine Lucco's Italian-born mother, had a new baby

each year, but still took in sewing or boarders. "'She used to cook their meals, wash for them, iron their clothes, and patch their clothes, all for $3.00 a month. At one time she had twenty-one boarders.'"[20] With mothers bearing such heavy burdens, Elizabeth Stern was probably not the only immigrant daughter who could "never remember my mother in my childhood in any other than one of two positions, standing at the stove cooking, or sitting in the corner; her foot rocking the cradle, and her hands stitching, stitching."[21] Most immigrant women accepted their hard lot, with varying degrees of repressed or expressed bitterness. Mary Molek realized her mother's pain and despair over her life as miner's wife, when she heard her cry, "'If I had known, I'd never have come. . . . This isn't what he promised me!'"[22]

If immigrant women were disappointed for themselves, they retained hope for their children, since part of the motivation for emigration as for work was to ensure them a better chance. As Russian Jewish immigrant Mollie Linker recalled, her mother "always wanted something better for her children, especially for girls."[23] Many realized that in America, achievement of "something better" required more schooling, and sacrificed much so that their daughters could attend school. Jewish immigrant mothers were especially eager to educate their daughters, since their culture stressed the value of learning, but women from all over the world supported their daughter's aspirations, often against patriachal opposition. For some mothers, a daughter's education was the fulfillment of a dream

denied to themselves; as Elizabeth Stern recalled, "It was as if she had a vicarious thrill and joy in my pleasure and achievements."[24]

Education beyond grade school, however, meant more than pleasure for the second-generation scholars. For many, high school was their first foray into the world outside the ghetto, and they returned with a heightened consciousness of their poverty and the differences between their lifestyle and that of their American classmates. Many attempted to initiate changes in their homes, including the American institutions of the "living room," unchaperoned dating, and sports. Many of the novelties that they tried to introduce were incompatible with old country customs and American poverty; for instance, Mary Molek's scientific ideas about nutrition aroused her mother's response, "'When your hygiene book or your teacher has to feed you, and has to get it for you, they can dictate what you'll eat.'"[25] Increasingly, educated daughters felt a cultural gap as well as a generational one widening the distance between themselves and their mothers. As Elizabeth Stern wrote, "To my eyes my mother's life appeared all at once as something to be pitied--to be questioned."[26] For immigrant mothers, this questioning was excruciating. As Jade Snow Wong's Chinese mother cried, "'You think you are too good for us because you have a little foreign book knowledge.'"[27]

Native American mothers shared this pain when they welcomed their daughters home after years away at school. Here the distance

between mothers and daughters had been multipled by the length of their separation, and the magnitude of the cultural differences between boarding school and reservation. After 13 years away, Hopi Helen Sekaquaptewa's mother "was glad I was home. If I would stay there, she would not urge me to change my ways."[28] Even when mothers showed such restraint, communities pressed Helen and other returning students to conform to traditional ways. The brothers of Mountain Wolf Woman, a Winnebago educated in a mission school, arranged a marriage for her that she resented, but her mother urged her to accept. "'Daughter, I prize you very much, but this matter cannot be helped. When you are older and know better, you can marry whomever you yourself think that you want to marry.'"[29] Many mothers thus tried to help their daughters readjust, but often did not know how to reach them. Zitkala-Sa's mother hoped that giving her daughter the only "white man's papers" she possessed, a Lakota-language bible, would ease her pain, but it failed to console her. "I was . . . neither a wild Indian nor a tame one. . . . My mother had never gone inside a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write. . . . My mother threw a shawl over her head and shoulders, and stepped out into the night. . . . She called aloud for her brothers' spirits to support her in her helpless misery."[30] Many daughters could not endure the continuing conflict between their desires to avoid hurting their mothers and becoming "good daughters" in traditional terms, and their newly acquired values and educationally induced aspirations.

Some chose to resolve this conflict by moving strongly in one or the other direction: Sanapia, a Comanche, accepted her mother's offer to train her as an Eagle Doctor, a very prestigious medicine position in the tribe; other, including Hopis Helen Sekaquaptewa and Poligaysi Qoyawayma, Pima Anna Moore Shaw, Navajo Kaibah and Sioux Zitkala-Sa chose to live and work elsewhere for awhile, until they felt sure enough of themselves to return.[31]

Many immigrant daughters followed a similar pattern withe the more restless ones moving away from their ethnic communities, exchanging mutually uncomfortable visits with their families. As Elizabeth Stern wrote of one such visit by her mother to her middle class suburban home, "She has seen come to realization those things which she helped me attain, and she cannot share, or even understand them." Young women of both groups did not deny their ties with their people, but many seemed to need a period of independence to work out a lifestyle that fit their ideas about their dual traditions. As Maxine Hong Kingston wrote, "I live now where there are Chinese and Japanese, but no emigrants from my own [parents'] village looking at me as if I had failed them. . . . I had to get out of hating range. . . . May my people understand [my link with tradition] soon so that I can return to them."[33]

Social scientists have applied the term "marginality" to the experience of the "second generation," the immigrants' children, and the first educated generation of Native Americans, who shared the uneasy position of "the person who stands on the borders or

margins of two cultural worlds but is fully a member of neither."[34] Blocked by prejudice, incomplete education, or lingering cultural loyalties from complete participation in the larger American society, and blocked too by acquired tastes and values from whole-heartedly returning to full participation in the native community, these daughters often spend what Pima Anna Shaw termed "a lifetime of treading the bridge between two cultures."[35] Hopi Polingaysi Qoyawayma explained the source of her "anguish of mind": "As a Hopi, she was misunderstood by the white man; as a convert of the missionaries, she was looked upon with suspicion by the Hopi people. Her restlessness, her moments of depression, were the inevitable result of her desire to be different, to make a new place for herself in a world that sometimes seemed determined not to allow her a place in it."[36]

These daughters worked hard to find themselves a place, or to create one, in a new lifestyle of their own. As Hopi Helen Sekaquaptewa stated, "Our lives were a combination of what we thought was the good of both cultures."[37]

One cultural element most daughters deemed part of the "good" was their bond with their mothers. The daughters' autobiographies and recorded histories reveal a strong, consistent theme of respect for their mothers, expressed in a depth beyond the platitudes any adherence to literary convention would command. By the time the daughters themselves, or members of their grandmothers' generation, considered their memories important enough to record, each had

matured beyond the rebellious stage, to the point of being able to understand and appreciate her mother's strength and pain, and the example she had set of perseverance, independence, and endurance. As Mark Molek wrote of her relationship with her mother, "The deep gashes each had inflicted upon the other were unbearable, and they lasted until death," and yet, "the spirit somehow . . . healed."[38]

Rather than "marginal" people, I consider these women part of the mainstream, or maelstrom, of American life. To cope with change, to live in a multicultural setting, has been the essence of American experience since colonial times. These women felt the sharpest cutting edge of cultural change, but even that proved not powerful enough to completely sever the ties that bind mothers and daughters.

NOTES

[1]Polingaysi Qoyawayma (Elizabeth Q. White) as told to Vada F. Carlson, No Turning Back (Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1964), p. 83.

[2]Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted, 2nd ed., enl.,(Boston: Little Brown, 1973), p. 226.

[3]Mary Antin, The Promised Land (1912; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry, 1969), p. 271.

[4]Elizabeth Hasanovich, One of Them (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), p. 240.

[5]Mary Molek, Immigrant Woman (Dover, Del.:M. Molek, Inc., 1976), p. 44.

[6]Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior (NY: Random House, Vintage, 1976), pp. 155-56.

[7][Maria Chona, recorded and edited by] Ruth Underhill, The Autobiography of a Papago Woman, Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, No. 46 (Menasha, Wis., 1936), p. 8.

[8]Lina Zuni, "Landslide," in Ruth L. Bunzel, Zuni Texts, Publications of the American Ethnological Society, vo. 15 (NY: G.E. Stechert, 1933), p. 58.

[9]H.G. Barnett, Leonard Broom, Bernard J. Siegel, Evon Z. Vogt, and James B. Watson, "Acculturation: An Exploratory Formulation," in The Emergent Native Americans, ed. Deward E. Walker, Jr. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 35.

[10]Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, Life Among the Piutes (1883; rpt. Bishop, Cal.: Chalfant Press, 1969), p. 48.

[11]Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Bonnin), "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," in American Indian Stories (1921; rpt. Glorieta, N.M.: Rio Grande Press, 1976), p. 9.

[12]Qoyawayma, No Turning Back, p. 18.

[13]Molly Richardson, in Stories of Traditional Navajo Life and Culture, ed. Broderick H. Johnson (Tsaile, Az.: Navajo Community College Press, p. 271; Kay Bennett, Kaibah (1964; rpt. n.p., the author, 1975), pp. 21-22, 204; Helen Sekaquaptewa as told to Louise Udall, Me and Mine (Tucson: U. of Az. Press, 1969), pp. 9-11; Qoyawayma, No Turning Back, pp. 24-25.

[14]Zitkala-Sa, "Impressions," American Indian Stories, p. 44.

[15]Handlin, Uprooted, p. 35.

[16]"Katya Govsky," "Getting Here the Hard Way," in Jewish Grandmothers, ed. Sydelle Kramer and Jenny Masur (Boston: Beacon, 1976), p. 69.

[17]Sekaquaptewa, Me and Mine, p. 93.

[18]Zitkala-Sa, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," American Indian Stories, p. 56.

[19]Sekaquaptewa, Me and Mine, p. 133.

[20]Josephine Lucco, in Corinne Azen Krause, "Italian, Jewish and Slavic Grandmothers in Pittsburgh: Their Economic Roles," Frontiers 2:2 (Summer 1977), p. 20.

[21]Elizabeth G. Stern, My Mother and I (NY: Macmillan, 1917), p. 21

[22]Molek, Immigrant Woman, p. 23.

[23]Mollie Linker, "The Mother in the Community," in Jewish Grandmothers, p. 98.

[24]Stern, Mother and I, p. 103.

[25]Molek, Immigrant Woman, p. 57.

[26]Stern, Mother and I, p. 110.

[27]Jade Snow Wong, Fifth Chinese Daughter (NY: Harper & Row, 1950), p. 129.

[28]Sekaquaptewa, Me and Mine, p. 145.

[29]Mountain Wolf Woman, ed. by Nancy Oestreich Lurie (Ann Arbor: U. of Mich. Press, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1961), p. 30.

[30]Zitkala-Sa, "School Days," American Indian Stories, pp. 69, 74.

[31]David E. Jones, Sanapia: Comanche Medicine Woman (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 24; Qoyawayma, No Turning Back, p. 111; Sekaquaptewa, Me and Mine, p. 198; Anna Moore Shaw, A Pima Past (Tucson: U. of Az. Press, 1974), p. 150; Bennett, Kaibah, p. 253;

Zitkala-Sa, "An Indian Teacher among Indians," American Indian Stories, pp. 96-98.

[32]Stern, Mother and I, p. 168.

[33]Kingston, Woman Warrior, p. 62.

[34]Milton M. Gordon, Assimilation in American Life (NY: Oxford U. Press, 1964), p. 240.

[35]Shaw, A Pima Past, p. 230.

[36]Qoyawayma, No Turning Back, p. 95.

[37]Sekaquaptewa, Me and Mine, p. 186.

[38]Molek, Immigrant Woman, pp. 11-12; 163.